

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



**Aaron S. Sherman**  
1789-1881

In 1918, while photographing and recording “Colonial” architecture on the Maine coast, a young architect, Frederic Hutchinson Porter, made an extraordinary discovery in the Washington County village of Columbia Falls. There he stumbled upon the Thomas Ruggles House, one of the finest examples of the Federal style in the state. Through the subsequent published account of his travels in 1921, the rest of the country learned about this house and its builder, Aaron Sherman, a housewright from Massachusetts, who is credited with erecting several houses Down East in the period from 1818 to 1827.<sup>1</sup>

According to his wife’s *Memorials*, published in 1902, Sherman trained as an apprentice in his native Massachusetts. Born in Marshfield on October 20, 1798, he apparently worked for an unidentified

builder from Duxbury, with whom he first came to Washington County.<sup>2</sup> At that time one of the county’s wealthiest citizens was Thomas Ruggles, a lumber baron in the town of Columbia. Ruggles evidently hired Sherman to build his house in 1818. Under the young housewright’s supervision, a residence of remarkable delicacy and refinement was completed in 1820 (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup>

Judge Thomas Ruggles had moved from Rochester, Massachusetts, to Columbia at the end of the eighteenth century. There he acquired a large fortune, primarily through the export of lumber. He also served as Justice of the Court of Sessions for Washington County and was very influential in local affairs.<sup>4</sup> Judge Ruggles acquired a four acre lot in Columbia Falls in 1817 and began to build what was undoubtedly the most prestigious house north of Belfast.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Thomas Ruggles House, Columbia Falls, c. 1930 view (MHPC).

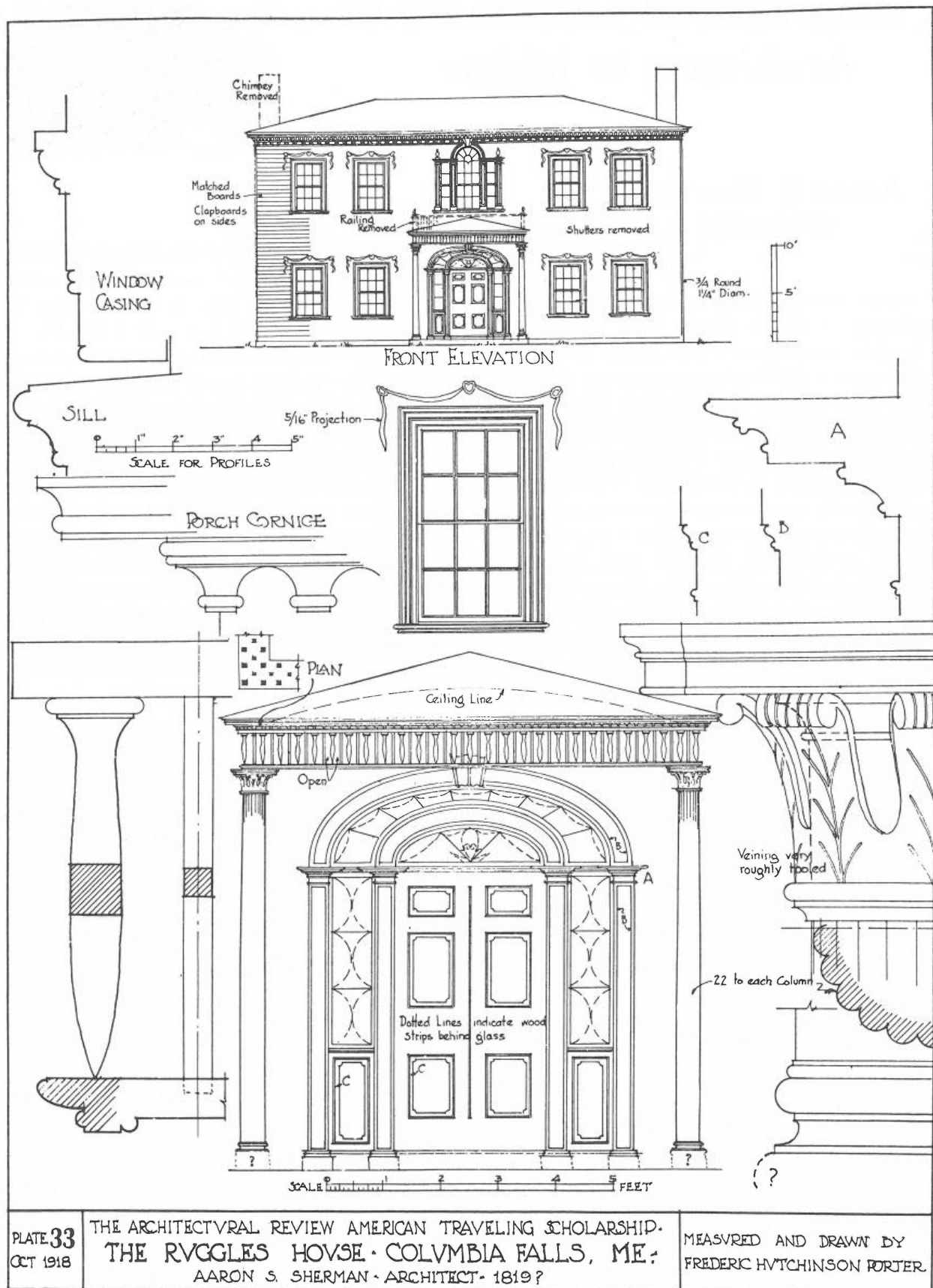


Figure 2. Thomas Ruggles House, sheet of drawings by Frederick Hutchinson Porter, *The Architectural Review*, June, 1921 (MHPC).

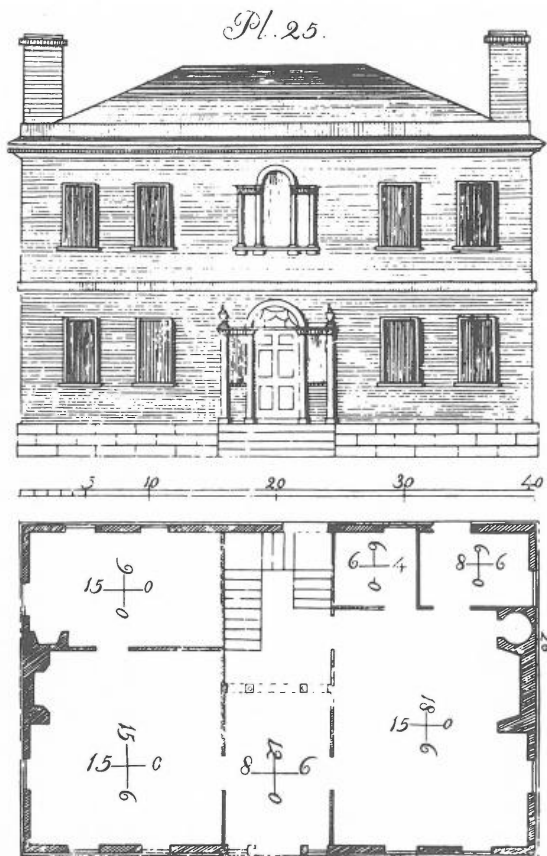


Figure 3. Plate 25, *The Country Builder's Assistant* by Asher Benjamin, 1797 (MHPC).



Figure 4. Staircase, Thomas Ruggles House, c. 1930 view (S.P.N.E.A., Boston).

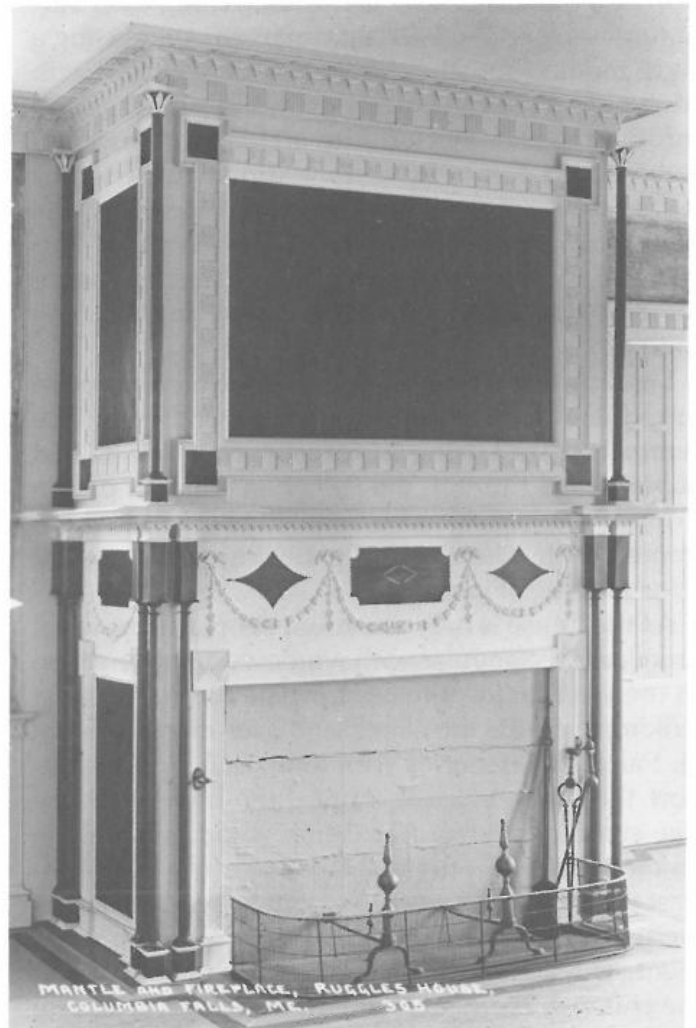


Figure 5. Parlor Mantel and Over-Mantel, Thomas Ruggles House, c. 1930 view (MHPC).

The two story, five bay facade with a low pitched hipped roof is typical of the period and reflects a knowledge of plate 25 of Asher Benjamin's widely circulated design book *The Country Builder's Assistant*, which was first published in 1797 (Figure 3). There is no accurate record of the configuration of the ell, which was removed in 1938. The principal facade is sheathed in match boarded siding, while the remaining elevations are clapboarded. The doorway in the center of the facade has double segmental arched fanlights and is sheltered by an unusual portico with a spindle-work frieze and columns with lotus leaf capitals. Directly above is a Palladian window, and to either side are double-hung sash surmounted by applied carved ornament suggesting a swag motif. Below the cornice is a frieze incised with triglyphs, a typical Federal period design repeated throughout the interior. The architrave, however, consists of a row of three dimensional carved lotus leaves. William Sumner Appleton, founder of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, said of the cornice that it was, "...one of the best that I know and is certainly pretty much unique."<sup>6</sup>

This splendid array of Adamesque trim is but an introduction to the lavish interior woodwork. The central hall has a flying staircase which is well lighted at both ends through the Palladian window on the front of the house and a large arched window en- framed with pilasters and panelling at the second floor landing (Figure 4).

As the house is only one room deep, the principal rooms are rectangular with windows on three sides. In the west parlor, the most ornate room, the most striking feature is the mantel and over-mantel (Figure 5). Paired columnettes with lotus leaf capitals support the mantel, while more diminutive ones are free-standing above. Varnished wood panelling is employed to accentuate decorative trim and to contrast with the white painted woodwork, which is embossed with a festoon design of composition ornament. Directly opposite the windows which flank the chimney breast are symmetrical doorways. The windows, doors, wainscot, and ceiling have architrave trim with rope moldings and triglyphs. In addition, the doorways are embellished with large fluted consoles (Figure 6). Clearly, Sherman was well versed in the most sophisticated Adamesque designs, which he adapted with his own interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

Work on the Ruggles House evidently prompted Sherman to settle in the area, although it is not clear exactly when. According to the 1820 census for Massachusetts, he briefly returned to Marshfield. By March, 1822, he was in Machias, a few miles north of Columbia Falls, where he is recorded as receiving payments for "making [a] court barr" in the

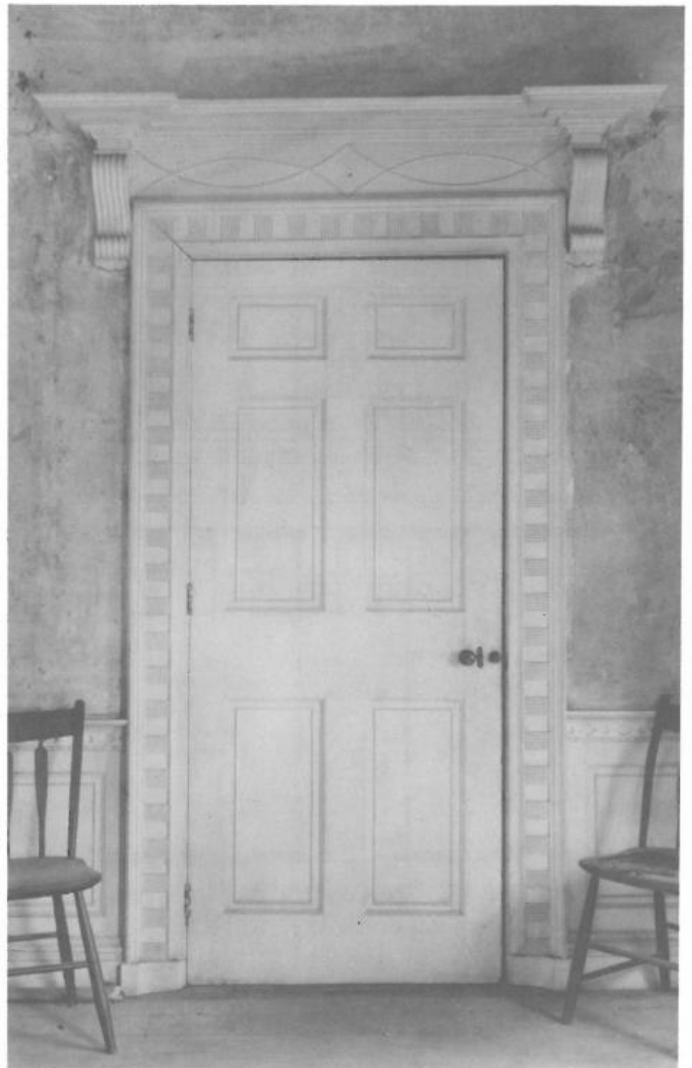


Figure 6. Parlor Doorway, Thomas Ruggles House, c. 1930 view (S.P.N.E.A., Boston).

county courthouse.<sup>8</sup> A year later, in March, 1823, Sherman married Lydia Whitney of Machias, the daughter of Revolutionary War hero Jeremiah O'Brien. Lydia's *Memorials* provide the only other references to her husband's work in Maine. Two houses still standing in Machias, where the couple settled, merit mention. The Obadiah Hill House, dating from 1824, is a conventional two story Federal style residence with a gable roof, five bay facade and central entrance surmounted by a lunette. Nothing about the house as it stands today, apparently substantially unaltered, is remarkable except for the site, which is a small hill with a commanding view of the town.

More interesting is the John Holway House across the river, built in the early 1820s. Although smaller than the Hill House, this one and a half story residence featured flush-board siding on the principal facade (now covered with cedar shingles) and an entrance with pilasters supporting spheres in bas relief (Figure 7). The arrangement of this doorway is similar to the Palladian window on the Ruggles



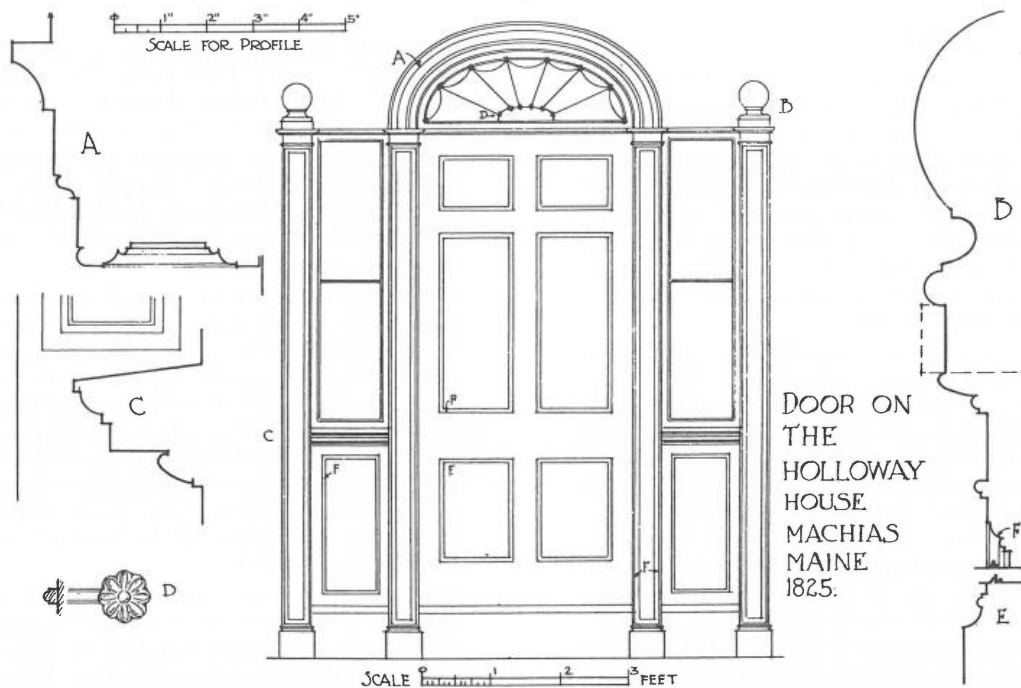


Figure 7. Entrance, John Holway House, Machias, drawing by Frederick Hutchinson Porter, *The Architectural Review*, June, 1921 (MHPC).

House, which has urns instead of spheres, a design shown in plate 25 of Asher Benjamin's *Country Builder's Assistant*. A third residence with a similar doorway was built for Samuel Bucknam in Columbia Falls in about 1820-21 (Figure 8). This house, which is still standing, may also be the work of Sherman.<sup>9</sup> The exterior and interior are embellished with rope molding and friezes with triglyphs identical to the Ruggles House.

Although the first three of Sherman's 13 children were born in Machias, he never owned property there. The family left Maine for Massachusetts in November, 1827, for reasons which can only be guessed.<sup>10</sup> Aaron Sherman first went to Boston, but then worked in several locations in southern New England<sup>11</sup>. Through the births of his children we can trace his peregrinations from Boston in 1829 to Bridgewater in 1831-42, Marshfield in 1844, and Providence, Rhode Island in the 1850s. From 1860 until his death in 1881 he remained in Marshfield.

Local accounts indicate that after leaving Maine he eventually took up the trade of "pattern maker" rather than housewright. This is significant, for it suggests that, in an age when ornament such as that on the Ruggles House was increasingly being produced by machine, both in iron and wood, Sherman could have found a natural outlet for his designing abilities. Indeed, his only known commission in Massachusetts was for alterations to Daniel Webster's house in Marshfield.<sup>12</sup> While it is not known precisely what this entailed (the house is no longer extant), Senator Webster did add an elaborate

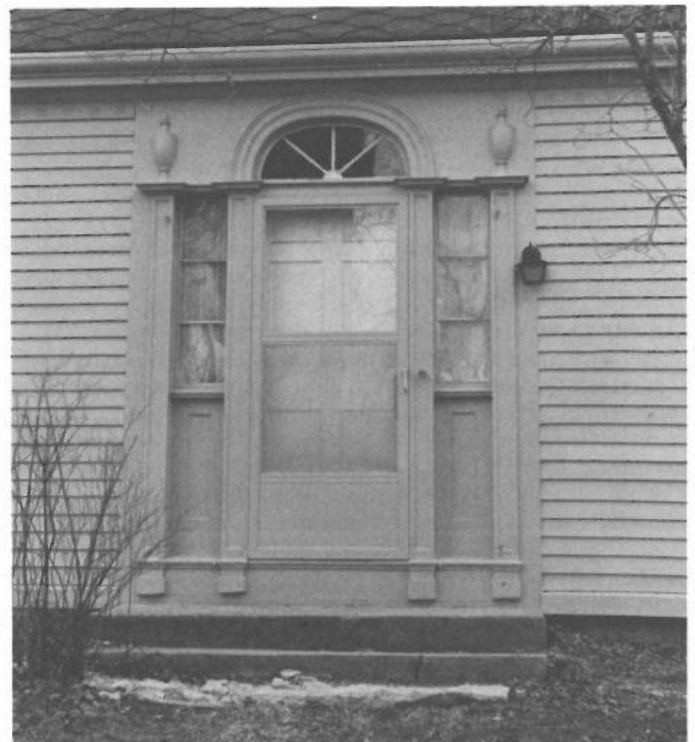


Figure 8. Entrance, Samuel Buckman House, Columbia Falls, 1978 view (MHPC).

Gothic Revival style wing to his farmhouse, probably in the 1840s. Although said to have been designed by his daughter Julia, the Gothic woodwork was quite sophisticated and could easily have been from the hand of Aaron Sherman.<sup>13</sup>

Roger G. Reed  
August, 1986

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Frederick Hutchinson Porter was on an *Architectural Review* American Traveling Scholarship in 1918. An account of his travels was published in a nine part series in *Architectural Review* in 1921. The story of the preservation of the Ruggles House as a house museum in the 1920s is in itself an extraordinary example of an early historic preservation success. Mary Ruggles Chandler, who led the effort to save the house, credits Porter for telling her that, "this house has no rival in Maine". Chandler to William Sumner Appleton, July 21, 1921, S.P.N.E.A. Archives, Boston.
- <sup>2</sup> *Memorials of Lydia Whitney Sherman*, edited by George W. and Andrew M. Sherman and printed in Morristown, New Jersey in 1902. Lydia Sherman (1804-1898) recalled the following about her husband's background: "In the town of Duxbury, adjoining Marshfield, this young man had been learning the trade of a carpenter and joiner, with a master whose specialty was church-building; and while yet an apprentice, he accompanied his master to Columbia Falls, Maine, where he assisted in the construction of the first Meeting House erected in that town." *Memorials*. pp. 25-26. Actually no meeting house was erected in Columbia Falls that early (c. 1816-17). Thus we cannot be sure why Aaron Sherman came to Maine.
- <sup>3</sup> Lydia Sherman does not mention the Ruggles House, although she does list several residences built by Sherman in Machias. The earliest written account linking him to the design of the Ruggles House is Porter's 1921 article. Porter's information came from Miss Elizabeth Ruggles, a granddaughter and the last decedent to live in the house. Thus, the source attributing the design of the house to Sherman is oral tradition.
- <sup>4</sup> His early death occurred in 1820, whereupon the family fortunes declined to the point that the house was in a very bad state of disrepair by 1918.
- <sup>5</sup> The impressive Colonel Black Mansion in Ellsworth was not built until 1824-27. A contemporary of the Ruggles House in Ellsworth is the Meltiah Jordan House of 1817, which is much less ornate.
- <sup>6</sup> William Sumner Appleton to Mrs. Richard Webb, September 22, 1921, S.P.N.E.A. Archives. Appleton was very supportive of the efforts to save the house. The S.P.N.E.A. Archives contains much material on this early preservation effort.
- <sup>7</sup> Another name mentioned in connection with the woodwork is Alvah Peterson (1797-1873), who is said to have come with Sherman to execute the carvings for the house. In fact, the ornamentation was produced by a variety of techniques, including applied composition, drill punch, and lathe. The source is family recollections, as recounted in *A History of Columbia and Columbia Falls*, by Nancy H. Green and Clarence H. Drista, 1976, p. 23. Peterson remained in Columbia Falls as a house carpenter. Nothing more is known about his career.
- <sup>8</sup> Records of the Court of General Sessions, September, 1822, Washington County Courthouse. This information was supplied by Lyman Holmes of Machias. Attorney Holmes was very helpful in researching Sherman's activities in Maine.
- <sup>9</sup> Lydia Sherman also mentions that Sherman "assisted" in building the county jail, "partially built" the Daniel Longfellow House on Main Street, and built the Toll House, which presumably was for the bridge across the Machias River. *Memorials*, op. cit., p. 26.
- <sup>10</sup> An obvious explanation is the lack of commissions in Machias comparable to the Ruggles House. Other more personal reasons could also have played a part. Lydia Sherman was the illegitimate daughter of Jeremiah O'Brien, and local accounts, including her *Memorials*, do not mention her father's name in connection with her, despite his status as a hero. Moreover, she was married in a house rather than a church. Thus, social ostracism may have been a factor. Indeed, it may explain the publication of her pious *Memorials*. In contrast, Marshfield, Massachusetts accounts of Aaron Sherman do mention Lydia's father.
- <sup>11</sup> Aaron Sherman may have travelled frequently between Machias and Boston. He is listed as a housewright for the first time in the Boston directory in 1826. He does not appear there in 1827, but reappears in 1828 and 1829.
- <sup>12</sup> *Descendents of William Sherman* by Mary Lovering Holman, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1936, p. 323; *History of Marshfield* by Lysander Salmon Richards, Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1905, p. 73.
- <sup>13</sup> Interior and exterior woodcut views of the wing appeared in *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* (available copy not dated) and in *Illustrated News*, January 1, 1853. Copies of these issues, plus a mid-nineteenth century photograph of the house, were made available to the author by Nancy Mullen, Librarian of the Ventress Memorial Library in Marshfield.

## LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY AARON S. SHERMAN

Thomas Ruggles House, Columbia Falls, 1818-1820, Extant.  
 John Holway House, 18 Elm Street, Machias, c. 1823-25, Extant.  
 Obadiah Hill House, High Street, Machias, 1824, Extant.  
 Toll House, Machias, 1820s, Destroyed.  
 Daniel Longfellow House, Main Street, Machias, 1820s (partial), Destroyed.

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